

# A Study on the Spatial Revitalization and Preservation of Historical and Cultural Towns Based on Spatial Narrative Design

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## ABSTRACT

Historical and cultural towns carry the memories and emotions of local residents accumulated over thousands of years, and revitalizing these towns is a key approach to preserving ancient cities. This study focuses on Songkou Town in Yongtai County, utilizing spatial narrative theory as its foundation. It explores the shaping and renewal of town spaces through multiple dimensions, including interactive experiences, cultural identity and spatial reconstruction, and the sustainability of spatial narrative. The study proposes strategies for the revitalization and protection of narrative spaces within historical and cultural towns, in order to provide valuable spatial narrative construction references for the revitalization and preservation model of historic towns. It also seeks to offer new perspectives and approaches for the ongoing protection, renewal, and sustainable development of historical and cultural towns.

**Keywords:** *Spatial narrative design, Historical and cultural towns, Revitalization and preservation, Songkou Ancient Town.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Historical and cultural towns play a crucial role in preserving historical narratives and are important carriers of local residents' nostalgia and collective memory. They are also valuable mediums for the transmission of national culture. However, most historic cultural towns are still in a state of partial improvement, with the overall environment needing further enhancement. According to research data and studies, the current issues faced by historical and cultural towns in China include the following: the first is population loss in ancient towns, leading to hollowing out and aging. Younger generations are more inclined to seek opportunities in large cities, which diminishes the social vitality of these towns and limits commercial activities, gradually resulting in the hollowing out phenomenon. The second is the aging of buildings and poor living conditions, coupled with instances of indiscriminate demolition and renovation. The buildings in these towns are often old and fragile, with some even at risk of collapse, negatively impacting residents' quality of life. Additionally, some residential

structures may undergo hasty and uninformed alterations, leading to disruptions in the original architectural layout and style. The third is the loss of traditional culture in ancient towns. Precious heritage such as traditional farming techniques, handicrafts, and local customs are gradually being lost. In response to these challenges, scholars from various disciplines have conducted multi-faceted research on the revitalization and preservation of ancient town spaces. This paper, grounded in spatial narrative theory, explores ways to strengthen town space construction, improve living conditions, and promote the protection and inheritance of traditional culture through multiple dimensions: interactive experiences, cultural identity and spatial reconstruction, and the sustainability of spatial narrative. The goal is to offer new perspectives and approaches for the protection, revitalization, and sustainable development of historical and cultural towns in the next phase of their preservation efforts.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION

### 2.1 *Historical and Cultural Towns*

Historical and cultural towns are those that possess rich cultural heritage, comprehensively reflect the traditional features and local ethnic characteristics of specific historical periods, and hold significant historical or commemorative value. They are also characterized by well-preserved aspects in areas such as architecture, urban layout, and cultural customs, maintaining the traditional essence and historical significance of the town [1]. Since 2003, a total of 312 towns in China have been designated as historical and cultural towns. These ancient towns, which have developed spontaneously into harmonious and beautiful entities, represent centuries of enduring vitality and are exemplars of China's rich regional culture. As important cultural resources for both the nation and region, historical and cultural towns hold significant value in the realms of architectural art, folk customs, religious beliefs, and social systems. They are the core medium for the dynamic transmission and display of regional culture. The town spaces are considered living cultural heritage, with their spatial forms intricately intertwined with the traditional lifestyles and production methods of successive generations of local residents, creating an inseparable interactive relationship. Consequently, the revitalization and preservation of historical and cultural towns is complex and closely tied to the involvement of local residents. It is necessary to integrate both tangible heritage (such as historical buildings, traditional streets and shops, handicrafts, and natural landscapes) and intangible heritage (such as residents' stories, lifestyles, festivals, and historic culture), while also addressing the needs and functions of modern society. In this process, it is essential to maintain the authenticity and integrity of cultural heritage while actively encouraging local residents to participate, making them the main participants to cultural revitalization and preservation. Through the collaborative efforts of local residents, government guidance, and social investment, sustainable development of cultural heritage can be achieved. This approach revitalizes historical and cultural towns, allowing them to find a unique cultural identity and functional value in contemporary society.

Through the revitalization and preservation of town spaces, a meaningful dialogue with history can be established. This approach allows the

traditional culture of historic towns to be presented to the public through spatial experiences that transcend time. By leveraging ancient culture to rejuvenate struggling economies, it provides strong support for the continuous inheritance of historical and cultural towns. Additionally, this process provides strong support for the continued inheritance of historical and cultural towns, while also playing a significant role in promoting the reshaping of vibrant towns.

### 2.2 *Spatial Narrative*

Narratology primarily studies the narrative structures and expressions involving people, events, objects, space, and time. It focuses on exploring and uncovering the intrinsic connections and essential characteristics among these elements[2]. Spatial narrative is a means of communication between people and space. The discussion of spatial narrative first appeared in Joseph Frank's 1945 article, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature"[3]. French scholar Michel de Certeau began exploring how the structure of physical space becomes a narrative carrier for historical memory[4]. In 2008, Long Diyong was the first to address the gap in research on spatial narrative theory in China. In his work, *Spatial Narrative Theory*, he categorized space into four types: story space, formal space, psychological space and existential space[5]. He Cheng and others began their analysis with industrial heritage spaces, focusing on historical and narrative spaces. They utilized spatial narrative to reconstruct historical spaces, build cultural identity, and preserve collective memory[6]. Yu Hui and others focus on how urban characteristics can continue urban memory by preserving and inheriting the historical narratives of cultural heritage districts. They discuss new approaches to the protection of historical cultural districts based on spatial narrative theory, aiming to create districts with narrative readability[7]. Xu Wen and others, based on the current status and issues of tangible cultural heritage protection in the Suzhou section of the Grand Canal National Cultural Park, proposed protection strategies for this heritage. Their approach is guided by the local application of spatial narrative theory[8]. Therefore, based on spatial narrative theory, traditional culture and historical memory can be deeply extracted and interpreted, endowing spaces with new narrative and cultural significance. This helps people to more intuitively perceive and experience past living scenes and cultural memories. Space is not only a carrier of culture but also a medium for storytelling,

allowing traditional culture to be reactivated and disseminated in modern environments. However, existing research tends to focus more on the reimagining and updating of urban historical districts, city museums, and urban industrial parks, with less attention given to ancient towns and villages.

Through the revitalization and preservation of town spaces, the traditional culture of historical towns can be presented to the public once again, offering spatial experiences that transcend temporal boundaries. By leveraging ancient culture to rejuvenate the local economy, this approach provides strong support for the ongoing preservation of historical and cultural towns and plays a crucial role in their revitalization and transformation.

### 3. STRATEGIES

Historical and cultural towns are vital carriers of rural culture in China, resembling a vivid historical panorama. Analyzing historical and cultural towns through spatial narrative theory can be approached by interpreting both tangible and intangible narrative clues. Tangible clues include historical buildings, traditional streets and shops, handicrafts, and natural landscapes. Intangible clues encompass residents' stories, lifestyles, festivals, and historic culture.

The narrative themes of historical and cultural towns can be divided into micro-level personal memories, meso-level family memories, and macro-level collective memories. Around these three themes, revitalization and preservation can be carried out through the following three approaches: (1) Interactive Experience: Enhancing the presentation and perception of personal memories through multi-dimensional interactive experiences, this involves deeply exploring and showcasing individual life experiences and stories in the historic town. Virtual Reality (VR) can be used to recreate personal historical scenes, or Augmented Reality (AR) to display personal memories at specific locations. Interactive exhibitions and experiences are designed to evoke emotional resonance, (2) Cultural Identity and Spatial reconstruction: Strengthening family memory and local cultural heritage through cultural identity and spatial reconstruction, this approach involves restoring and renovating historical buildings, residences, and family memorial halls linked to families. Regular family history exhibitions and traditional craft activities are organized to showcase

how family memories intertwine with local culture. This also aims to strengthen residents' sense of identity and belonging to local culture. (3) Sustainability of Spatial Narrative: Sustaining collective memory through long-term spatial narratives, it ensures the continuity and development of collective memory in modern contexts. Sustainable spatial narrative strategies present the ancient town's historical evolution and cultural accumulation comprehensively. Institutions such as collective memory museums, historical centers, or folklore museums can display the town's historical development, key events, and social changes. By using digital technology to record and preserve these memories, collective memory is passed on effectively, playing a significant role in cultural and educational contexts.

In spatial narrative design, incorporating rhetorical techniques such as directness, metaphor, symbolism, emphasis, and repetition, and using micro-updates to the town as a path, helps to tell compelling stories, invigorate cultural heritage, and restore the local ambiance. Spatial narrative design interprets stories from memories, using clues embedded in those memories to present visitors with a more intuitive and immersive experience. Currently, spatial narrative design primarily explores the relationship between spatial environments and social-cultural meanings. It focuses on questions such as "What kind of information does the space carry?" "How should the structure of the information it carries be understood?" and "How can this be reinterpreted?"[9] Additionally, in addressing the issues of population decline, aging buildings, and the loss of traditional culture in ancient towns, spatial narrative not only offers an effective solution but also leverages historical and cultural towns as unique carriers to embed memory into space, conveying deep spiritual meaning and revitalizing cultural heritage. Specific measures include revitalizing stagnant economies through ancient culture, encouraging those who have left to return and invest in their hometowns, and developing new business models centered on traditional crafts and culture. This can attract younger generations back, providing them with job opportunities and room for development. For the issue of aging buildings, the "restore old as old" approach preserves historical features, while non-functional structures can be repurposed into multifunctional spaces such as folk museums or family memorial halls to facilitate living heritage preservation. Furthermore, organizing traditional

craft training and cultural workshops helps integrate traditional culture into modern life, ensuring its continuation and development through practical implementation. These comprehensive measures not only effectively address the various challenges facing ancient towns but also reshape their cultural and economic vitality, allowing them to thrive with renewed vigor in contemporary society.

#### **4. CASE STUDY: SPATIAL ANALYSIS OF SONGKOU ANCIENT TOWN IN YONGTAI COUNTY**

##### **4.1 Overview of Songkou Ancient Town**

Songkou Town in Yongtai County, historically known as Songyang, has a long history and is rich in narrative resources. It is an ancient town with significant historical, cultural, and tourism value ("Figure 1"). The ancient town enjoys a strategic location, nestled between mountains and rivers. It has long served as an important political, economic, cultural, and transportation hub in Yongtai County. In 2008, Songkou Town was designated as a National Historic and Cultural Town, making it the only ancient town in Fuzhou to receive this honor. Today, Songkou Ancient Town boasts numerous accolades, including being recognized as a "Chinese Historic and Cultural Town" and "Cross-Strait Rural Tourism Demonstration Base". As a Chinese Historic and Cultural Town, Songkou Ancient Town is home to numerous historical buildings, a thriving commercial sector, and a rich legacy of talented individuals. It benefits from excellent natural conditions and a profound cultural heritage. To this day, the town still preserves well-maintained streets, marketplaces, and ancient architectural complexes from the Ming and Qing dynasties.



Figure 1 Songkou Ancient Town.

##### **4.2 Classification of Clues**

Songkou Ancient Town is a historic town where the old and new coexist, blending ancient traditions with modern developments. Its historical roots run deep, dating back to the Neolithic period, but it wasn't until the Song Dynasty that the town began to flourish, becoming a significant hub at the intersection of four prefectures and five counties. As time has progressed, the spatial form and cultural characteristics of Songkou Ancient Town have undergone multiple transformations. Different architectural styles and cultural elements from various historical periods converge here, creating a unique and diverse character. Therefore, Songkou Ancient Town has preserved traditional cultural memories, such as ancient residences, ancestral halls, commercial streets, and bridges, while also incorporating new architectural styles and modern elements. This blend of old and new creates a dynamic pattern where historical and contemporary features coexist, resulting in a unique and evolving spatial and cultural character. From both temporal and spatial dimensions, a comprehensive assessment of Songkou Ancient Town involves data retrieval and on-site investigation to evaluate its intrinsic and surrounding aspects, including natural, geographical, cultural, historical, and social elements. This detailed analysis includes a thorough compilation and categorization of both tangible and intangible clues of the ancient town. Tangible clues encompass historical buildings, traditional streets and shops, handicrafts, and natural landscapes. Intangible clues include residents' stories, lifestyles, festivals, and historic culture ("Table 1").

Table 1. Classification of narrative clues in Songkou Ancient Town

Clue Type	Narrative Clues	Description
Tangible Clues	Historical Buildings	De Xing Building, Guan Di Temple, De He Residence, Yan Kui Residence, Ning Yuan Hall, Rui Wen Residence, and over 100 other ancient residences, mostly traditional residences from the Ming and Qing dynasties.
	Traditional Streets and Shops	Zhi Street, Heng Street, Rice Noodle Street, Guan Di Temple Street, He Xing Road, and others.
	Handicrafts	Bamboo Weaving, Wooden Barrels, Steaming Baskets, Persimmon Lacquer, Rattan Weaving, Bamboo Shoots Husks, Ironware, and others.
	Natural Landscapes	Dazhang Stream, Changqing Stream, Jinping Mountain, Gu Mountain, Bijia Mountain, Wenbi Mountain, Donghu Mountain, and others.
Intangible Clues	Residents' Stories	The patriotic poet Zhang Yuankan of the Southern Song Dynasty, Daoist master Zhang Shengjun, Six Scholars in one family, and others.
	Lifestyles	Seedling Cultivation, Plowing Fields, Oil Pressing, Rice Harvesting, and Grain Distribution.
	Festivals	Fairs culture, Farming and Reading Culture, Folk Customs, Min opera, and so on.
	Historic Culture	Lion Dance Performance, Rattan Weaving Craft, Tiger Respect Boxing, Persimmon Dyeing Techniques and other intangible cultural heritages.

Based on tangible narratives and integrating intangible elements, construct the three main narrative pathways (interactive experiences, cultural identity and spatial reconstruction, and the sustainability of spatial narrative) to create an engaging narrative space. By adopting multi-dimensional performances along the time and space axes, establish connections between existing historical family residences, clan settlement spaces, collective memory nodes, and the people, thereby conveying deeper emotional resonance.

### 4.3 Narrative Route Design

After reviewing and analyzing historical documents and on-site survey data, and conducting a comprehensive assessment of the historical, geographical, cultural, and social aspects of Songkou Ancient Town, the narrative nodes are further organized and developed based on spatial narrative theory. The narrative design can be approached from the following aspects.

#### 4.3.1 Interactive Experience

Zhang Yuangan and Zhang Shengjun, as prominent figures in Songkou Ancient Town, can

have their stories intricately woven into the town's cultural experience through spatial narrative design, integrating their histories and legends deeply into the cultural fabric of the town. For instance, interactive installations and multimedia displays could be set up near poetry inscriptions, the former residence of Zhang Yuangan, and related historical sites within the ancient town, transforming these cultural heritages into vivid narrative nodes. Visitors can scan QR codes on inscriptions or buildings to trigger audio explanations or AR scenes related to Zhang Yuangan's poetry, providing an immersive experience of his literary creations and political activities during different historical periods. In his former residence, an immersive exhibition hall can be established where light and shadow effects recreate Zhang Yuangan's living environment and the ambiance of his literary creation. This would allow visitors to feel as though they've traveled back to the Song Dynasty, experiencing the spiritual world of this renowned poet. At the same time, at the Zhang Shengjun Temple or the sites associated with his legends, holographic projections or interactive theaters can be set up to vividly recreate the mythical stories of Zhang Shengjun protecting Songkou Ancient Town through a multi-sensory experience. Visitors can

not only observe the ritual scenes but also immerse themselves in the interactive theater, allowing them to personally experience Zhang Shengjun's sacred status in the local belief system. Through these design, visitors can immerse themselves in the stories of Zhang Yuangan and Zhang Shengjun, finding historical memories and cultural symbols related to them in every corner of the ancient town. This deepens their understanding of the unique cultural essence of Songkou Ancient Town.

#### *4.3.2 Cultural Identity and Spatial Reconstruction*

In ancestral halls and family homes, multimedia displays and interactive walls can be installed to showcase the origins and development of the family within the ancient town. Through old photographs, family genealogies, and stories of notable family members, significant events from different periods and the contributions of family members can be recreated. This helps visitors understand the historical significance of the family within Songkou Ancient Town. In the main hall or bedrooms of the ancestral home, audio guides, holographic images, or physical exhibits can be used to showcase the family's traditions and heritage in areas such as culture, education, and commerce. Landmark signs or historical introductions can be placed in streets and alleys related to family stories, and AR technology can be used to recreate significant scenes from those stories. Visitors can use their smartphones to scan the QR codes, view historical footage or listen to explanations, and learn about the locations where family members once lived and worked, thereby experiencing the family's influence on the development of the streets and alleys. In specific districts, arrange interactive theaters or immersive performances where actors portray key events from family stories and audiences can participate, bringing pivotal moments of the family's history to life. Visitors can "participate" in the storylines, interact with family members, and experience their living environments and emotional journeys, thus gaining a deeper understanding of the close connection between family culture and the ancient town's space.

#### *4.3.3 Sustainability of Spatial Narrative*

In the core areas of Songkou Ancient Town, such as the square, clan ancestral halls, Heng Street, and Zhi Street, which are key sites of collective memory, long-term preservation measures should be implemented, along with the use of modern

technology for display and interpretation. These spaces can feature permanent exhibitions, informational signage, or digital guides to ensure that, for decades to come, the historical events and collective memories of the ancient town are clearly communicated. Organize annual festivals related to collective memories, such as deity parades, market fairs, ancestor worship ceremonies, or traditional folk activities. These activities not only reenact history but also encourage both residents and visitors to participate, allowing them to experience and understand the history and culture of Songkou Ancient Town. Through these activities, collective memory is continuously activated and reinforced within the new social environment. Regularly hold educational activities or cultural heritage workshops within the ancient town, targeting both young people and visitors. These workshops focus on the history of the ancient town, traditional crafts, and folk culture. By engaging participants directly, they provide a deep understanding of the town's collective memory and help to pass down this knowledge through oral narration and practical experience. By integrating cultural creativity and commercial activities, collective memory can be revitalized. Transforming old streets into multifunctional spaces that combine cultural display and commercial use will not only enhance the town's appeal but also encourage former residents to return and start businesses. This approach fosters interaction between the younger generation and older residents, supporting the sustainable development of the town's economy.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

As urbanization progressing, destructive urban redevelopment often occurs, leading to the gradual loss of many ancient towns' memories and cultural characteristics. This paper, based on spatial narrative design, explores the revitalization of historical and cultural towns, focusing on the application of narrative subjects and clues, and includes a case study of Songkou Ancient Town. The research indicates that by integrating stories, history, and cultural elements into the revitalization design of historical towns, it is possible to create narrative environments with greater emotional resonance and deeper significance, thereby providing new perspectives and theoretical foundations for the revitalization and preservation of these towns' historical and cultural heritage. This study provides valuable insights and guidance for the protection and revitalization of historical and

cultural towns, aiding in the effective transmission and sustainable development of cultural heritage.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The study conception, design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis were all conducted by Lin Yuanxing. The author has reviewed and approved the final version for publication.

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